

JTC Part 03

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CHAPTER THREE

The journey to Deshelle was uneventful, much to the relief of those members of the band who had only just learned about the parlous state of repair of Tollain's elderly runabout. It had been a good model in its day, but age takes its toll on all made things, and while Tollain would rush to a luthier in an instant should one of his precious instruments show any sign of ailing, his interest in *Bellbird*, while just as proprietarily affectionate, was less practically focussed.

"Priorities," Kaichang summed it up. "He really needs to sort out his priorities."

"Sitting right here, actually," Tollain said without heat.

"If a guitar or a drum breaks, the worst that can happen is we have to skip a performance," Verneen said. "But if *Bellbird* breaks—" She gestured expressively.

"I do get it," Tollain said. "There's not a lot I can do about it right now. As soon as we land on Deshelle I'll start looking for something better." He patted the bulkhead beside him. "Sorry, old girl, it's not me."

"If you're so fond of it, why didn't you keep up to it?" Orville demanded.

"It does seem illogical," Korynn commented from across the room.

"Yes, well, I don't always perform to the highest specifications of logic," Tollain retorted. "You see, we had this agreement, *Bellbird* and I. She would keep going, and I would look after her—sort of—when I remembered. When I had time. When I had the money. She understands what's important."

"It's a ship, Kintarsh," Kaichang said. "And if you treated a real woman that way, you'd have me to reckon with."

Tollain stood up. "Look," he said. "I can see there's no way I'm going to come out of this without giving you your pound of flesh, so can we just assume you've had it? I'm sorry. I was wrong. I'll sort it out. All right?"

"Like you could spare a whole pound of flesh," Kaichang muttered. "All right. But see that you do. It's our lives you've been gambling with all this time."

“Actually,” Korynn said when Tollain had gone to join Suncat at the controls, “the probability of a life-threatening malfunction developing as a result of Tollain’s neglect is still less than 0.000—”

“That’s not the point!” Kaichang snapped back. “It’s the attitude. He needs to start being practical about things.”

“You mean he needs to be someone else,” Verneen said gently. “When did you last try it?”

The dark girl stared at her a moment, then laughed.

“You’re right, of course,” she said. “Men never change, and it’s stupid to expect them to. Well, we’ll just have to see what sort of jerry-built macho-mobile he gets this time.”

“There is something we could do,” Verneen said, after a moment.

A little while later, Tollain opened the door of the living quarters and bounced in.

“We’ll be landing on Deshelle in a—bout—” His voice tailed off at the sight of four members of the band, sitting or reclining exactly as they had been, clad in full pressure suits.

“Yes?” Kaichang said innocently, turning her faceplate towards him, her voice coming over the com speaker from her suit radio.

Tollain burst out laughing. He leaned against the door frame and laughed helplessly, and one by one Kaichang, Verneen and Orville joined in.

“All right,” Tollain said at last. “Point made. I will find us another ship, a bigger one. And I’ll also put *Bellbird* in for a full service and check-up. After all,” he added, “I’ll need something I can use to get away from you lot. Now get out of those things and stand by for landing.”

A short while later, landing formalities completed, the band were ensconced in a bland, anonymous hotel suite not unlike the one they had lately quitted, their instruments locked in another secure store, and Tollain was scanning the planetary data-net.

“Lauchlan-Gambrill—” he began.

“NO!” The fivefold cry was heartfelt.

“They were a good make a hundred years ago, but their designs are way out of date,” Suncat said.

“And they need constant maintenance, or the structural integrity’s usually the first thing to go,” Orville added. “If *Bellbird* had been an L-G instead of...whatever it is...you’d have been in real trouble, mate.”

“Okay, okay,” Tollain said. “Now I look, it does say ‘spares or repair only’...all right, what should I be looking for?”

“Let’s have a look.” Orville leaned over Tollain’s shoulder. “What’s your price range?” He looked. “Wow. Last of the big spenders. You can start by doubling that. We can afford it, right, ‘Chang?”

Kaichang joined him. “Goddess, yes. When did you last buy a spaceship, Kintarsh?” She reached over and made the adjustment. “We can go that high, easily, and I suggest we do. It’s an essential expense, so Gomer can’t creeb about it. Let’s see.” A new range of ships appeared on the screen, and Verneen’s head appeared under Kaichang’s arm. “Those look a bit more like it,” Kaichang said.

“It only needs to get us from A to B,” Tollain said.

“And then to C, D, E, F and so on through the alphabet before returning us to A. Besides, some of us like a little comfort when we travel.”

“Hedonist,” Tollain muttered.

“Shedonist, please,” Kaichang corrected.

“What’s that one?” Verneen pointed tentatively at a picture halfway down the screen.

“That...is...a...” Tollain brought up the full page. “Valtakoff-Sampicque VS Warpster

and completely out of our price range.”

“No it isn’t,” Kaichang said firmly. “Let’s have a look...crew capacity six to ten, passenger/cargo space...mm hm...life support and amenities get a five star rating, I like that...nice big chunky drive...”

“It’s huge,” Tollain protested. “It’s huge and impersonal and people would think I was compensating for something.”

“You do know your voice went up two octaves just then, don’t you?” Orville said.

“By ‘impersonal’ you mean ‘doesn’t smell of old socks all the time,’ presumably,” Suncat put in, leaning in between Kaichang and Orville.

“And you are compensating for something,” Kaichang said. “You’re compensating for having five roughly normal-sized bandmates who like to sleep in normal-sized beds on long journeys. That bunk on *Bellbird* hates me.”

“What happened to watching the millicrabs and the rooibos tea and all that?” Tollain said desperately.

“This is why we watch them,” Kaichang explained. “So that when a chance like this comes along we don’t have to watch it go by. If I’d told you we had enough to buy a ship like this you’d have blown it all on instruments.”

“Ensuite sonic showers in all crew and passenger quarters...ooh...” Verneen was looking at a note further down. “Listen to this. ‘The manufacturerers (they can’t spell) are so sure of the reliability of their artificial gravity there’s even a genuine water-type bathroom.’”

Tollain bowed his head in defeat. Over him, Suncat and Kaichang high-fived.

“Sold, I think,” Orville said.

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While Kaichang and Orville went to complete the purchase, Kaichang promising to beat the vendor down to at most two-thirds of the listed price (while not going into details about precisely how this beating would be accomplished), it fell to Tollain to cancel the booking on the *Refulgent Infanta*. This, of course, involved some tedious explanations, not to mention a sizeable fee.

He had been looking forward to a nice leisurely cruise to Messelnek on a luxury liner. He was sure they would have had baths on board, possibly even a swimming pool. Now he was going to have to fly there himself, on an unfamiliar ship he was sure he wasn't going to like.

The upside—there was always an upside—was that they could take all their kit, rather than leaving it in storage here on Deshelle. That would be less of a worry. As a gesture of defiance he contacted the most upscale spaceship repair company he could find and booked *Bellbird* in for the full hundred-point treatment, and then chartered a reliable pilot to fly her back to Argenthome once she was fully spaceworthy and deliver her to his regular bay at the spaceport. That was an essential expense too, he decided, and Gomer could make as much noise as he liked. Tollain and his little ship had history.

Mind you...

He looked idly over the specs of the Warpster. No denying, it didn't look at all bad. Lots of space, you couldn't argue with that. And Suncat would enjoy having a bathroom all to herself. They could even maybe stay in the ship once in a while and save on hotel bills. It was still far too big, of course, but then it was a good thing maybe to have some room to grow into.

No, once he thought about it calmly, this was a good move. He had been silly to object to it. Kaichang and Orville would give it a good looking over, and if there were any problems, they just wouldn't buy the thing. There were at least three other ships of comparable size and comfort on the listing. And once they'd got one, they could leave for Messelnek at their leisure rather than scrabbling out of bed at oh-frod-hundred to check in three hours before departure.

His personal comlink buzzed, and he answered it.

"All done," Orville's voice said.

"No problems?"

"Nope. Ship looks fine, service history's up to date, all the systems check out. Guy can't spell, but he's a reputable dealer. And Kaichang got us a very tasty discount. I think we've landed on our feet here." Orville hesitated. *"As long as you're okay with it."*

“Yes,” Tollain said. “I was just being stupid. Of course it makes sense. How soon can it be flight-ready?”

“*Chang’s doing the provisioning now. Should be ready to lift any time tomorrow morning. We’ve got the keys and the port’s been notified. We’ll head back soon as everything’s finalised. Did you have any trouble with the Repellent Invader?*”

“*Refulgent Infanta*. No, no more than the usual. Short notice, so on and so forth. Okay, good. See you soon.”

Tollain hung up. Verneen was watching him from a chair across the room, her magazine forgotten on her lap.

“What?” he said, smiling.

“Oh,” and she ducked her head, “nothing.”

“It’s never nothing with you,” Tollain said.

She got up, came closer. “You just keep surprising me is all,” she whispered, and planted an impulsive kiss on his cheek before darting back to her chair and burying herself in her magazine.

“You never surprise me,” Suncat said from the doorway. “I knew you’d talk yourself into it.” The kiss she gave him was longer, and warmer.

“You don’t mind?”

Suncat shrugged. “I could have enjoyed having people bring me drinks and things...but this is more sensible. And Kaichang’s right about the bunks on *Bellbird*. It’s a good decision.” She smiled at Verneen. “As if that was ever in any doubt.” She went over and kissed the pale girl. “You’re our Good Decision Fairy, aren’t you, my darling?”

Tollain sat very still and fought to subdue the irrational, stupid, unnecessary little stab of jealousy. Suncat loved them all, each one of the band; had loved Kaichang and Verneen before she ever met Tollain. Tollain...was still working on it.

Froddit, he was still unused to loving anyone, unless it were the shade of his long-dead mother. He was still finding his way around the countless little negotiations and adjustments involved in letting another person into his life (did she really think *Bellbird* smelled like old socks? Why hadn’t she said?). Last year, during the Cold

December business, she had enjoined the band to “try to love each other a bit,” and Tollain had resolved to do just that; and most of the time he succeeded. Well, fairly often. Well...sometimes.

But it had to be different between him and Suncat, didn't it?

Or did it? And...could he cope if it wasn't?

The sound of the door opening brought him sharply out of what he decided to call a reverie. Orville and Kaichang came in, clothed in triumph and, in Kaichang's case, carrying a canvas bag.

“We have a ship,” Orville announced.

“We already have a ship,” Tollain said.

“We have another ship,” Orville announced, in precisely the same tone.

“What's in the bag?” Verneen asked.

“The manual,” Kaichang said, pulling out a book about two inches thick. Korynn, manifesting suddenly from where he had been the whole time, reached for it, but Tollain got there first.

“I like manuals,” he said, taking the book and nearly dropping it. It was heavy. “You can have it next, Korynn. You're sure there were no problems?”

“Not a one,” Orville confirmed. “Guy showed us a stack of certificates almost as thick as that book. GBAS, SVM, Tri-Cluster, to name but three, and all up to date. “

“Tri-Cluster? It's a racer?” That was Suncat.

“It could be, with a bit of tinkering. As it is, it's ideal for us.”

“We left the rest of the bump on board,” Kaichang said. “Obviously it comes with the ship, but we didn't want to carry too much.”

“And we can lift tomorrow morning?”

“Soon as we shift the last of the personal stuff over from *Bellbird*. We got the new one transferred to the next bay along, so it won't take more than half an hour.”

“And do we have anything left on the keycard?” Tollain said.

“Plenty,” Kaichang said. “Thanks to me.”

“All right then,” Tollain said. “Maybe now we should think about whether we feel like making some music tonight?”

“And if so,” Korynn added, “perhaps we might rehearse it?”

A chorus of groans went up.

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Holocams flashed and a cheer went up as Gestalt bounced on to the stage of the Arts Complex.

“Hey, everybody!” Suncat called. “Glad to be here?” Another cheer. “That’s a coincidence—so are we!” An even bigger cheer, which Tollain broke into with the drum intro of “Tell You A Story.”

“They’re all girls,” Orville had said, peering through a spyhole a minute or two earlier.

“No they’re not all *women*,” Kaichang said, stressing the last word. “Everyone here presents as feminine.”

“Why?”

“Why not?”

“It’s just the culture here,” Verneen said. “Didn’t you read up before we came?”

“Well, it must get confusing.” Orville had evaded the question.

“I can’t see why.” Kaichang finished applying a steel comb to her hair, to no discernible effect. “Unless, of course, you’re more concerned with what a person is than with who she is.” The comb, within an inch of the head of Kaichang’s axe, emitted a fat blue spark which discharged down the neck of the instrument. Korynn winced visibly, and Kaichang herself started and stepped back a pace.

“Come on, people,” Tollain urged, and Kaichang, recovering quickly, picked up the axe and followed him and Suncat to the stage.

Now, as she ripped into the solo of “Tell You A Story,” Orville and Verneen shot her a startled glance. Tollain, busy with his drums, did not look up, but his ears pricked. The dark girl was oblivious, her fingers flying up and down the filaments of coherent force

that formed the “strings” of the axe, bending, hammering, picking out an aching harmonic. Suncat, watching, half expected bolts of light to fly from the instrument. She almost missed her cue for the final chorus.

The song ended with a plangent wail from the axe, and applause erupted from the darkness in front of them.

“Kaichang Belgardis!” Orville shouted, gesturing at her, and the applause redoubled.

“What got into *you*?” Verneen said quietly, moving close.

Kaichang looked nonplussed for a moment, then grinned.

“Electricity,” she said.

“Thank you,” Suncat was saying. “Now we’ve got you all going, let’s take it down a little. This is a song written by Verneen Halannim, but I’m going to sing it ‘cause I love it so much and I’m selfish. ‘Arbours And Glades.’”

Korynn began, with a shimmering piano solo that sounded improvised but—they all knew—was not. Kaichang, switching to torung, picked out the high notes on the harp strings, and Orville supplied the barest minimum of bass.

*“Walk a little way with me
through the gardens in the spring
When the blossom falls like snow.
Talk a little while with me
and watch the young birds on the wing
See how they go.
Tender green shoots peeping through the earth
new buds betokening new birth
as we explore each other’s heart
And mother nature does her part...
Spend a little time with me
As the sunlight slowly melts
Into evening’s shades...
Then we’ll walk home together
Among these arbours and glades.”*

The texture of the music began to build up. Verneen was adding chords in a “string” voice on another of Korynn’s keyboards, and Tollain came in gently on the drums.

*“Walk a little way with me
Through the summer gardens fair
And tell me how it’s all gone wrong.
Talk a little while with me
Try to pretend that you still care
Though the birds have changed their song.
Honeybees by now have been and gone
Pollination’s done, but life goes on
As the flowers start to show their age
And we reach the bottom of the page...
Spend a little time with me
As the sun moves mercilessly on
And the beauty fades...
And I’ll watch you walk away from me
Among these arbours and glades.”*

The music turned to the minor key and became turbulent, wild piano arpeggios over a suddenly dominant, striding bass line. Verneen’s flute wailed like the wind, and Kaichang took over the “string” chords, now dark and threatening as thunderclouds. Tollain held the drums back, letting the others make the running. The storm slowly subsided, and the arpeggios returned to the rippling pattern with which the song had begun, but the feeling was different, was somehow absent. Sunecat’s voice, as she took up the song again, was cool, distant.

*“And now I’ll walk a little way
Through the garden’s winter chill
When frost has silvered every line.
The birds are flown so far astray
The fountains frozen now and still
And all this icy world is mine.
I am older now and colder too
We were never us, just me and you
But if I could only have my choice
It would be right now to hear your voice...”*

“To hear your voice...” Tollain sang antiphonally, and they repeated the line in ascending harmonies as the music warmed around them, Verneen and Kaichang now both working at the keyboards, “brass” and “wind” sounds joining “strings” and

piano. Tollain and Verneen sang the final lines together, his voice harmonising above hers.

*“Second chances come out of the blue
We were so much more than me and you
Now and then we’ll always make mistakes
But a love that’s tempered seldom breaks...
So spend this little life with me
And we’ll beguile the swiftly fleeting sun
With serenades...
And we’ll always walk together
Among these arbours and glades.
Among these arbours and glades.”*

As Suncat and Tollain repeated the last line antiphonally, Verneen, Kaichang and Korynn, weaving their arms in a sort of cat’s cradle, built up the various sounds coming from the keyboards to a triumphant and yet somehow tender climax, and then the girls withdrew their hands, rather like a conjurer taking the chairs out from under his levitating assistant, leaving Korynn holding down a final iridescent chord. When he released it, there was a second of dead silence before the applause began.

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“There has to be an easier way of doing that one,” Kaichang grumbled afterwards.

“There is,” Korynn stated. “If you allow me to pre-programme the keyboard part—”

“No,” said Tollain and Kaichang together.

“On a studio album you can just about get away with it,” Tollain said. “In a live performance, with all of us having to play along to a tick-tock machine? What happens if it goes wrong? And don’t tell me it wouldn’t. Korynn, I know you’re brilliant, but things do go wrong.”

“I don’t mind doing it this way,” Verneen said. “It’s worth it for the sound.”

“Why is it that way round?” Kaichang changed her ground. “Why does he go and she has to stay?”

It was Tollain who answered. “Because he made the mistake,” he said. “He was wrong and she was right.”

Kaichang looked at him suspiciously, but was saved from answering when Korynn reached for her axe.

“Hands off, Mitwoch,” she said.

“I must see if that electrical discharge did any damage,” Korynn insisted.

“It played perfectly,” Kaichang said, picking up the axe and cradling it protectively.

“You can have a look at it later, Korynn,” Tollain said, “*if* Kaichang lets you, and I hope she will. Right now, we need to get out of here, find some food—I’m starving—and get some sleep. I still want to make a bit of an early start tomorrow.”

The crowd round the stage door was quite large, though, and it took more than half an hour to satisfy them all. Verneen slipped away early, and returned as the last fan was leaving.

“What have you there, my pretty maid?” Tollain said, eyeing the paper-wrapped packages in Verneen’s arms, from which appetising aromas were emanating.

“Targosaur burgers, sir, she said,” Verneen answered promptly, with a slightly awkward curtsy. “I spotted an all-night stand just round the corner when we arrived. That one’s yours, Kaichang, and Orville, that’s yours with the beer sauce. Plain meat for you, Korynn, and one with everything for Suncat. I suggest we eat them in the van while they’re hot.”

“I seem to have two,” Tollain said.

“This is a problem?” Verneen raised an eyebrow.

“No, no, as long as everyone’s got something.” Verneen’s concern for Tollain’s general health had passed beyond a joke into general acceptance. His condition, he maintained, could be kept at bay as long as he ate and slept regularly, and the pale girl had taken it upon herself to ensure this.

The burgers were good—whatever a targosaur might be, its meat was tender and flavoursome—and Gestalt returned to the hotel and stowed away the kit in good spirits. Orville was still processing Deshelle’s approach to the problem of gender equality.

“Of course they all have breasts, Torres,” Kaichang said, as they approached their

suite. "Males have it done surgically when they reach puberty. That way both parents can take equal parts in the child-rearing, rather than the mother having to do all the input while the father deals with all the output."

"I don't know why you're making such a fuss, Orville," Suncat said. "We've been on lots of planets where men and women dressed the same."

"Yeah, but they usually dress like men," Orville argued.

"And that's better?" Kaichang queried. "Think carefully before you answer."

"Personally, I much prefer it this way," Tollain said, opening the door. "Hello."

They crowded round and looked in at the chaos that had been their room.

"Oh Goddess," Suncat said in a small voice.

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It looked worse than it actually was. Nothing had been seriously damaged, and nothing seemed to be missing. Restoring order took no more than fifteen minutes, even without Kaichang, who had gone down to seek enlightenment from the night staff. Even so, it was an unlooked-for extra effort, and when she returned she found the others sprawled in various chairs and couches, more or less semi-conscious.

"Nothing doing," Kaichang reported. "Various people came and went, including several who claimed to be visiting other guests, and of course the nice man from Something-or-other Security who was giving the camera system its quarterly check-up and had to turn it off for ten minutes while he refibulated the gronomatrix, or something. Could have been a put-up job, could just have been someone being opportunistic. We'll never know."

"It was a warning," Verneen said unexpectedly. "Like that note. 'Stop looking. We know where you are, we know what you're doing. Whatever you find, we'll take it away, so give up and go home before you get hurt.'"

"Well, we won't," Tollain said stoutly. "They don't know everything. I'll bet they don't know about the new ship."

"The keys," Kaichang said, stricken. "Are they still here?"

“I had them with me,” Tollain said. “And the manual. I don’t know how much *they* know, whoever *they* are, but I’ll bet that at worst they still think we’re going on the *Refulgent Infanta*. With luck we’ll be on our way before they twig.” He yawned. “And now I’m going to get some sleep. I suggest you all do the same. It was a good gig and a perfect end to the tour, and tomorrow we go in quest of Violinworld.”

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“What’s all that?” Suncat said, as Orville piloted the van through the gates of the port. Flashing red lights and milling figures could be seen off to one side.

“Some sort of rumpus in the commercial section,” Tollain diagnosed. “Nothing to do with us. Orville, we go left here.”

The van swerved across two lanes, fortunately occupied by more focussed drivers.

“Sorry,” Orville muttered.

The Warpster hung in the docking cradle next to *Bellbird*, looking even bigger than it had in the picture. Tollain’s jaw dropped as he stared up at it, while Orville drove round to the rear and the cargo bay doors.

“That’s not a ship, it’s a small town in a tin,” he said at last.

“You’ll get used to it,” Kaichang said lightly. “Keys?”

Tollain handed them over. “Not sure I want to get used to it,” he muttered.

Kaichang pressed a combination on the fob and the huge doors rolled back to allow the ramp to extend. “Well, it’s up to you,” she said. “You can be happy with it, or not. It’s a done deal anyway.”

The van rolled up the ramp, and Orville guided it into one of the two vehicle bays; the other was occupied by a sleek-lined four-seater air-car. Gestalt got out and stretched their legs. The cargo bay was as cavernous as a cathedral.

“This came with it?” Tollain asked, running his hand along the flank of the air-car.

Orville nodded. “Standard issue orbit-to-ground transport for a ship this size. We may as well leave the kit stowed in the van for now. Want the quick tour?”

“I think,” Kaichang said slowly, “I’ll go for a wander. Back in fifteen minutes okay?”

“Sure,” Tollain and Suncat said together.

For the next quarter of an hour, guided by Orville, Tollain, Suncat and Verneen explored the ship. Tollain grudgingly admired the living quarters, which were not quite big enough to contain the whole of *Bellbird* but came close. Suncat squealed and clapped her hands at the sight of the huge sunken bath, in which Tollain could in fact have comfortably swum a few strokes. Verneen went to one of the ubiquitous computer interfaces and tapped some exploratory keys.

“This is streets ahead of *Bellbird*,” she said. “Sorry, Tollain, but it is.”

Tollain had to admit, it seemed like a very nice ship. He followed Orville to the flight deck and studied the control surfaces, relating them to the diagrams he’d scanned in the manual before going to sleep the previous night.

Korynn appeared in the doorway.

“The computer and engineering systems could be considerably upgraded,” he said.

“Not yet.” Tollain was firm. “Let’s make sure they work as they are before we let you loose on them, please.”

Korynn bowed slightly. “As you say, Tollain.”

“I think they’ll be fine as they are,” Orville said. “Practically do the flying for you anyway. Only reason you’d use manual would be to show off.”

“How’s the ephemeris?” Tollain asked.

“Updated last month,” Orville said. “I’ve already checked, yes, Messelnek is there.”

“All right then.” Tollain took a deep breath. “Let’s take one more turn round *Bellbird*, pick up any unconsidered trifles, and then—”

Kaichang arrived at a run.

“You know that commotion in the commercial section?” she said without preamble. “I went and asked about it. Ship blew up last night while undergoing routine decontamination procedure. Nobody on board, but they’ve definitely established it was a bomb. Premature detonation, they’re saying, but they don’t really know.”

“What ship?” Tollain asked, though he already knew the answer.

Kaichang gulped air, steadied herself.

“The *Refulgent Infanta*,” she said. “Completely destroyed, along with the docking cradle it was in.”

They all looked at each other.

“Well,” Tollain said. “Time to go, then, I think.”

“Are we still sure we want to do this?” Verneen said. “That wasn’t a warning.”

“I don’t know,” Tollain said. “That might be just what we’re supposed to think. In any case, we’d better get spaceborne before they work out we aren’t there. Anything still on *Bellbird* will have to stay there. All right, people, find your places and brace for takeoff.”

“Full arti-g,” Orville pointed out. “No need to brace.”

Tollain looked at him.

“Brace for liftoff, everybody,” Orville said loudly, and the others went to find somewhere to sit.

Tollain, alone on the flight deck, sat down in the pilot’s chair, produced the manual and opened it to page seventeen, boldly headed “GETTING STARTED.”

“Now then,” he murmured, “how do you fly this thing?”

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Tollain was good at extracting information from manuals, and also good at knowing when to let the computer do it, whatever it was. The as yet unnamed Valtakoff-Sampicque Warpster, all on its own, completed the electronic ritual of securing clearance, slipped its moorings and lifted into the sky above Deshelle spaceport while he watched placidly from the comfort of the pilot’s seat. Orbital insertion followed with equal smoothness, and by that time Tollain had mastered the elementary procedures involved in selecting a destination and laying in the appropriate course. As the introction drive engaged, he locked off the autopilot, got up and went in search of the others. So far, he thought, the ship was everything Orville and Kaichang had claimed it to be.

“What do you think?” Kaichang said as he emerged into the common area off which the crew quarters opened. Like every other part of the ship, it was tastefully yet comfortably furnished, with two low tables set with chairs and a selection of armchairs and couches, on which Suncat, Orville and Verneen were relaxing. The dark girl stood up on tiptoe and pirouetted with arms outstretched. “Space,” she proclaimed, “the final frontier.”

“I admit it,” Tollain said. “I’m impressed. One up for the Good Decision Fairy.” Verneen, across the room, looked up and gave him a brief smile. “So,” he went on, “transit time to Messelnek is just over a week, as opposed to three weeks on the *Refulgent Infanta*. Do we have everything we need?”

“We have provisions enough for a year,” Suncat said, “and the computer does almost everything except talk. We won’t be bored.”

“Assuredly we will not,” Korynn said, coming in from the other end of the room. “I have worked out how to subdivide the cargo bay. There is an ingenious system of programmable partitions. I have therefore created a rehearsal space and unpacked our instruments. We can begin whenever you are ready.”

A chorus of groans greeted this announcement.

“First day and night in space is time off for good behaviour,” Tollain decreed, “but Korynn’s right. This trip is no excuse not to practise, especially since we have our own ship and no need to worry about waking the neighbours. Tomorrow morning ship time we start. I want to work some more on Pass The Parcel, and we need to be thinking about the next album.”

“Come on,” Orville protested. “We can’t all be Captain Prolific like you. Some of us need time to craft a song.”

“Then take the time,” Tollain said easily. “But preferably start taking it tomorrow. This isn’t a holiday, people.”

Kaichang laughed abruptly.

“What?” Tollain said.

“You. Standing there all stern saying ‘this isn’t a holiday.’ Have you ever, in all your

life, *not* been on holiday, Kintarsh?” Kaichang looked around the group. “Torres, you know what I mean. Verneen, you too. I don’t know about you, Mitwoch...but honestly. Do you really call this work?”

Orville shook his head. “Gigs are exhausting, sure, and practising is hard, especially with Doctor Goggles in charge...but it beats any day job I’ve ever had.”

“Same here.” Kaichang relented a little. “I know you work hard at the music, Kintarsh. We all do. Money for nothing it’s not. But look at us. We’re taking six months off work to fly off and investigate something that interests us. We’ve got a comfortable ship, a comfortable place to live back on Argenthome, and we can spend our time doing something we love and making money at it. Most people in this galaxy, even on Affiliated worlds, would give their eye teeth for that. It’s a privilege.” She shrugged. “Don’t ever forget it.”

Tollain looked steadily back at her. Then he smiled.

“Point taken,” he said. “I’m going to finish this manual, and then—”

A chime sounded from the flight deck.

“What’s that?” Suncat said.

“Give me a moment.” Tollain was leafing through the book.

“It is an incoming transmission,” Korynn stated. “The computer must have identified it as addressed to one or more of us.”

“Who knows we’re here?” Verneen asked rhetorically.

“Let’s find out,” Kaichang said, stepping over to the wall terminal. She touched one of the control surfaces, brought up a menu, selected an option.

An electronically disguised voice emerged from the speakers.

“Nice move,” it said. *“Last chance. Turn round and go home. Death waits on Messelnek.”* There was a beep.

“That’s it,” Kaichang reported.

Gestalt looked at each other in silence.

Tollain broke it.

“Who the immaculate frod,” he said slowly, “wants to kill us for trying to find out what a violin is?”